

Diminutive hopes on Nuclear Disarmament

A. Vinod Kumar

The 65th anniversary of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings has just gone by. This was one passionate moment for the comity of nations to conscientiously introspect why all the movements and initiatives on disarmament in the past six decades have not borne fruition. This was also an opportunity to formally acknowledge the failure of the recent momentum on nuclear disarmament, initiated by the statesmen quadrate – Henry Kissinger, William Perry, Sam Nunn and George Schultz. Their two-piece exhortation in the *Wall Street Journal* had triggered a global wave of debates, initiatives and commissions to explore pragmatic paths towards Global Zero, all of which faded out with the disappointing outcome of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference (RevCon) in May.

Of greater significance today while debating the regression of the disarmament movement is the reversals, consciously or unwittingly, made by President Barack Obama, after a year or two of promising declarations of a grand nuclear-weapon-free-world vision. The manner in which the US delegation spearheaded resistance of the nuclear weapon states (NWS) against the promising and ambitious recommendations of the Main Committee-I at RevCon, decimated the prospects of a disarmament timeline, in effect proving President Obama's prophecy that disarmament will not happen in his lifetime.

The Main Committee-I had recommended consultations among the nuclear weapon states in 2011 to accelerate concrete progress on disarmament and was supposed to report its outcome to the NPT Preparatory Committee (PrepCom) in 2012. The UN Secretary General had to convene an international conference in 2014 “to consider ways and means to agree on a roadmap for the complete elimination within a specified timeframe, including by means of a universal, legal instrument.” Under pressure from the NWS, all the timelines were removed with the Final Document merely suggesting prompt engagements to “accelerate concrete progress on steps leading to nuclear disarmament.”

This belied expectations of an Obama plan to not just revive the shaky edifice, but also initiate credible steps within the NPT system towards a disarmament roadmap. President Obama had kindled these hopes by presiding over the UN Security Council Resolution 1887, which, among other things, had reaffirmed the spirit of the Article VI of the NPT - to pursue “negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to nuclear arms reduction and disarmament, and a Treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.” Though a new stand-alone treaty for disarmament was never anticipated, President Obama was widely expected to propose concrete proposals at the RevCon to carry forward the promises he made at Prague.

Far from doing so, the fact that his delegation campaigned against the Main Committee's report created the impression that the administration was concerned only on strengthening the non-proliferation pillar of the NPT. In fact, there were indications of this outcome months before the RevCon, if one went by the internal strife within the

government on nuclear modernisation, during the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) deliberations. That a dominant section within the government, as well as the quadrate, backed funding for the life-extension of nuclear warheads in place of the Reliable Replacement Warhead (RRW) programme, amply illustrated the predicaments faced by President Obama in pushing his disarmament vision to the bureaucracy. Going by this dissonance, the US position against the Main Committee recommendations was hardly surprising.

Would this spell the end of the Obama vision? Probably not, if the President is willing to work on alternatives! A glimmer of hope came up at the RevCon itself when the US delegation backed references to the feasibility of legal frameworks like the Nuclear Weapons Convention (NWC) to pursue the final phase of disarmament. Though the state-parties did not agree on any specific new instrument, the mere reference to a new instrument or a NWC is a promising beginning. It was always puzzling on why President Obama, despite his disarmament vision, had not valued the potential of the Nuclear Weapons Convention. In fact, President Obama had wasted a golden opportunity by not invoking a no-first-use (NFU) doctrine in the NPR, which could have stimulated calls for a global NFU - a key element in the NWC proposal.

The NWC idea has always been a non-starter thanks to the lukewarm response from the weapon states, especially the US. The US pessimism on a stand-alone instrument is not surprising and is best reflected by President Obama's assertion that disarmament will be a difficult dream for the near future. The crux of such beliefs is the dominant thinking that nuclear reductions will be a laborious grind, with inherent risk of security dilemmas and threat dynamics which makes total elimination a near-impossible task. As a result, promising proposals for a disarmament timeline, aided by a stand-alone instrument, have found few takers. The best example of this pessimism is the rejection of the disarmament timeline proposed by Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in his Action Plan presented to the UN in 1988. Rajiv Gandhi had then proposed a new treaty to replace the NPT in 1995 that will give facilitate elimination of all nuclear weapons by the year 2010.

Total elimination within a 20-25 year span was a laughable matter in 1988, more so the demand to supplant the NPT with a new treaty. However, the fact that no disarmament effort had consolidated 25 years later, calls for a passionate revisiting of the Rajiv Action Plan. For, a Nuclear Weapons Convention and an elimination timeline are critical elements missing in the Obama vision. By initiating a global NFU momentum and operationalising the practical steps towards elimination, including nuclear test ban and fissile materials production cut-off, President Obama will then find value in the NWC and elimination timelines as potent tools to reject his own prophecy of a Global Zero utopia. There lies a historic opportunity to rewrite the future of the world.

(The author is Associate Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi. His e-mail id is: vinujnu@gmail.com)

All opinions in the web articles are of the contributors. The Institute of Foreign Policy Studies bears no responsibility for any of these.